

# NCO Stories

*A selection of Valor*



## Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller

*Citation to award the Medal of Honor*

*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty: Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller distinguished himself by extraordinary acts of heroism while serving as the weapons sergeant in Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 3312, Special Operations Task Force-33, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan, during combat operations against an armed enemy in Konar province, Afghanistan on January 25, 2008. While conducting a combat reconnaissance patrol through the Gowardesh Valley, Miller and his small element of U.S. and Afghan National Army soldiers engaged a force of 15 to 20 insurgents occupying prepared fighting positions. Miller initiated the assault by engaging the enemy positions with his vehicle's turret-mounted MK-19 40 mm automatic grenade launcher while simultaneously providing detailed descriptions of the enemy positions to his command, enabling effective, accurate close air support.*

*Following the engagement, Miller led a small squad forward to conduct a battle damage assessment. As the group neared the small, steep, narrow valley that the enemy had inhabited, a large, well-coordinated insurgent force initiated a near ambush, assaulting from elevated positions with ample cover. Exposed and with little available cover, the patrol was totally vulnerable to enemy rocket propelled grenades and automatic weapon fire. As point man, Miller was at the front of the patrol, cut off from supporting elements, and less than 20 meters from enemy forces. Nonetheless, with total disregard for his own safety, he called for his men to quickly move back to covered positions as he charged the enemy over exposed ground and under overwhelming enemy fire in order to provide protective fire for his team.*

*While maneuvering to engage the enemy, Miller was shot in his upper torso. Ignoring the wound, he continued to push the fight, drawing fire from more than 100 enemy fighters upon himself. He then again charged forward through an open area in order to allow his teammates to safely reach cover. After killing at least 10 insurgents, wounding dozens more and repeatedly exposing himself to withering enemy fire, Miller was mortally wounded. His extraordinary valor ultimately saved the lives of seven members of his team and 15 Afghan soldiers. Miller's heroism and selflessness above and beyond the call of duty, and at the cost of his own life, are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Army.*

# Special Forces Soldier receives posthumous Medal of Honor

By J.D. Leipold  
Army Public Affairs

Courage was a defining factor in Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller's life.

"It has been said that courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point," said President Barack Obama during a Medal of Honor ceremony last month. "For Rob Miller, the testing point came nearly three years ago, deep in a snowy Afghan valley. But, the courage he displayed that day reflects every virtue that defined his life."

The president bestowed the honor upon Miller's parents, whose son's actions allowed seven of his Special Forces comrades and 15 Afghan soldiers to escape an ambush kill zone.

More than 100 of Miller's family, friends and fellow Soldiers were at the ceremony, which was held in the west wing of the White House. Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen, Secretary of the Army John McHugh and Army Chief of Staff George W. Casey Jr. were also at the presentation.

The president told the group that Miller was a true leader, as demonstrated by two previous commendations for valor during his first tour in Afghanistan.

On his second tour, Miller – known as Robby to his teammates, family, friends and teachers – was killed after he volunteered to serve as point for a night patrol with Operational Detachment Alpha 3312, in the Chenar Khar Valley near the Pakistan border on Jan. 25, 2008. He was 24.

Miller's fellow Green Berets remember the nightmare of that freezing winter night years later on the other side of the world.

## "Ambush Alley" Mission

About 9 p.m. the day before Miller's death, his unit received word that a Predator unmanned aerial vehicle feed had picked up enemy fighters armed with rocket-propelled grenades moving into a house. The Soldiers were ordered to link up with Afghan soldiers and proceed into "Ambush Alley," traveling as far as possible in their up-armored Humvees, dismounting and moving toward the compound.

Once the unit was able to confirm the Predator was on the money, the team's Air Force joint

tactical air controller would radio for a few 500-pound bombs to be dropped. Once the bombs had been dropped, the team was to move in and conduct a battle-damage assessment – at least that was the plan.

As the team moved up the mountain in their vehicles – 300-foot vertical cliffs at both sides – there wasn't much wiggle room, recalled Staff Sgt. Eric Martin. A counter attack was nearly impossible because their guns were already angled to maximum elevation, he said.

To make matters worse, the convoy then came across two boulders at different intervals that had to be blown with C4.

"I was thinking, 'Okay, we're gonna get hit from here, so we were trying to be as quiet as possible until the explosion, obviously,'" he said. "The second boulder was nearly within sight of the objective, so we had to come to a stop again and blow that boulder. I believe that's when the enemy was tipped off."

## Attack goes forward

The unit and the Afghan soldiers moved on until they positioned themselves to attack. Then, Martin and his team noticed through night-vision devices that fighters were emerging from the house and taking up new positions.

When the firefight began, Martin thought everything was going well because the unit hadn't been hit. The unit returned heavy fire, and the attack appeared one-sided, like the enemy was trying to bug out of the area, Martin recalled.



Photo by D. Myles Cullen

President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Honor to the parents of Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller. Miller's father Philip and mother Maureen were given the award on Oct. 6 during a ceremony at the White House. Miller received the honor for his heroic actions in Afghanistan on Jan. 25, 2008.

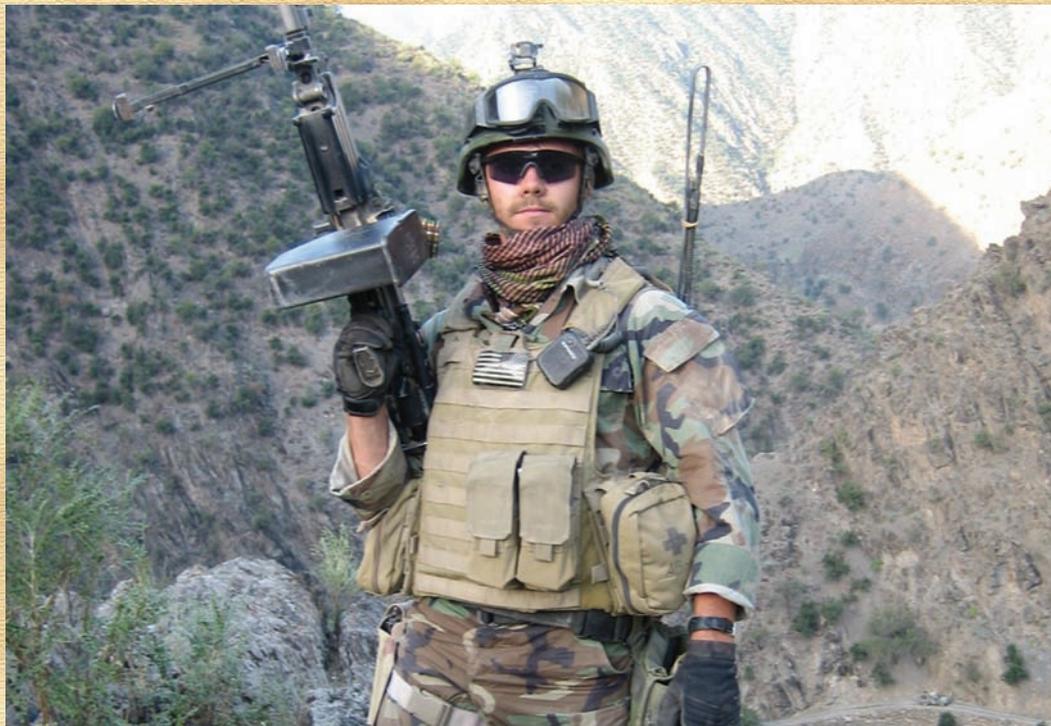


Photo by U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on Oct. 6 for his heroism and valor while serving in Afghanistan in January 2008.

“Nothing unusual about it,” Martin said. “It became unusual after the initial bombs were dropped, and we’d opened with heavy fire.” The unit then sent a dismounted element ahead of the vehicles, for which Miller was point.

“This was Robby’s second trip over. He had picked up Pashto on the first deployment. ... He had a talent for languages, he knew French, German and a little bit of Russian,” Martin added. “He just had a gift, which is why he was out front talking to the Afghans and in the position he was in, because the [Afghan] soldiers had moved out too quickly. We needed to slow them down to gain command and control.”

The dismounted element led the convoy across a bridge.

Everything seemed good. No shots had been fired, and only a few bombs had been dropped. The Soldiers assumed their unit had taken out the enemy forces. Then, the sound of a Russian-built PKM machine gun split the air, answered by an M249 squad automatic weapon and M4 carbine fire. The entire hillside erupted into muzzle flashes and chaos.

### *Covering fire saves team*

Martin knew the high-pitched cracks of the SAW, and he also knew Miller was behind the trigger because he had left base without a suppressor, rolling heavy with extra 200-round 5.56 mm drums attached to his kit.

“He didn’t care about the weight. ... It was that mentality he had that characterized the whole team ... ‘We’re gonna roll heavy; we’re gonna make sure we’re ready to fight and that

we’re prepared for it,’” Martin said.

When the hillside exploded into the firefight, the members of the Special Forces team found themselves in a close-quarters ambush less than 50 feet from Taliban fighters. Almost immediately, the team’s leader, Capt. Robert B. Cusick, was wounded.

That’s when Miller took command, taking out a machine-gun nest, moving forward, constantly firing and throwing grenades while his teammates moved in reverse from the kill zone with their wounded captain. As they moved, they radioed for a medevac and worked to regain control of the situation. It was the last time any of Miller’s team saw him alive.

“I think he wanted to provide that extra firepower for his buddies so they could get out of the kill zone,” said Cusick. “He

bounded forward; we moved back. ... He saved lives that day. It was just in his personality. [Word always spread] from his former team leader and team sergeant that he was a go-to guy, very reliable, very eager and one of the better in-shape guys on the team because of his gymnastics background.”

### *A real gem*

Miller was always quick to volunteer and take on more responsibility. Even on the night before his death, Miller introduced himself to the Afghan soldiers and got them up for the mission,



Courtesy photo

Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller was killed Jan. 25, 2008, after volunteering to serve as point for a night security patrol in Afghanistan. For his actions, which allowed seven of his Special Forces teammates and 15 Afghan soldiers to escape an ambush kill zone, Miller is a posthumous recipient of the Medal of Honor.



Courtesy photo

A childhood photo of Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller. He was awarded the nation's highest medal.

Cusick said.

Aside from his physical capabilities, knowledge of tactics and desire to speak Pashto fluently, Miller served as the detachment's resident gemologist during his off-time. He was the guy his teammates deferred to when they wanted to make sure a gem was a good deal, Cusick said.

"After he was killed, the team passed Robby's gem-detecting kit back to his family. ... That meant a lot to them," he said. "Many of the gems, he'd brought. Others had been gifts [from Afghans, which was] a kind way for them to thank us."

Several of those gems have since been mounted and Miller's mother Maureen wears one on a necklace. A few others were turned into earrings worn by his sisters, in memory of their oldest brother.

### *Brother in arms*

Although no one will ever know what Miller was thinking the day he saved his teammates, Martin and his comrades believe the only thing going through their friend's mind was concern for the team.

"I think we were all feeling concern for each other that night," Martin said. "I think in combat, the biggest fear I have and I think the other guys have is letting down the guy to the left and right. It's not getting shot; it's about doing the right thing and not letting our brothers down."

Miller's father, Philip, said his wife, three other sons and four daughters knew a large part of Miller's responsibility was working and training with local nationals, and they knew about some of the day-to-day activities. But, the family didn't hear much about combat actions, because he didn't want to worry his

family or divulge secrets about what he was doing.

At his parent's home in Oviedo, Fla., between deployments, Miller would share photographs and video clips with his family – he loved the scenery of Afghanistan, talking about his passion for learning Pashto, sipping tea and interacting with the Afghans.

"He was enthusiastic about his involvement and what was going on in the country," his father remembered. "We're very, very proud and somewhat humbled, but very appreciative of those kind words we heard about our son's actions in Afghanistan. But it's more than that; it's the pride and satisfaction that one of your children did something so remarkable."

### *Historic moment*

Philip Miller said he wondered if he would be able to perform the same way his

son did in an extreme situation, taking calculated risks which you may not survive. He said he started to listen to the stories of Soldiers, including those in the same firefight as his son's, and realized how remarkable they were.

"I'd like everybody to remember that he [Robert Miller] loved what he was doing, and he was very good at it. He was extremely enthusiastic about it, and it was very clear he really embraced the work, the mission and the people he worked with – American and Afghan," Miller's father said.

Maureen Miller said when her family learned her son's actions, they were not surprised. She said her son was the type of person to protect his fellow Soldiers – that's what his training taught him.

"I think the fact that he died doing something that he loved and thought was worthwhile was an important factor in helping us deal with the situation," she said. "Rob always wanted to be a Soldier. I think there are several factors that influenced him to join the Army – one was his sense of adventure, another one was his sense of the importance of military service. It's something that runs in our family. Another important factor was Rob's sense of appreciation for the freedom and opportunity that we have in this country – something he learned after hearing stories when he was 8 or 9 of some friends who were Cambodian refugees."

Philip Miller, who was also a Soldier, said receiving the Medal of Honor on behalf of his son was important because it shows the gratitude of the country.

"Our son will become part of the written history of the United States," he said.

Learn more about Staff Sgt. Robert J. Miller at <http://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/miller/>.